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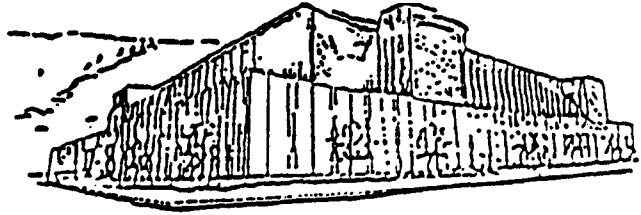
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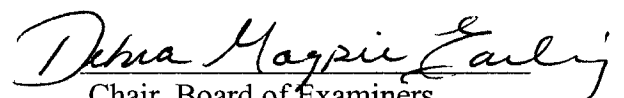
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SHELTERBELT
a novel excerpt

by
Colleen O'Brien
B.A., Drake University, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
2000

Approved by


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PART 1
1935
Chapter 1

Beyond the stained glass the day shown bright and clear, so cold that crystals twirled on the wind, bits of frozen air, caught, sparkling. A chill sat stiff in Lorraine's back. Her baby, Ginny, slept on her arm. The Gospel was from Luke. Father Callahan read slowly, in Latin. Lorraine followed the English written in the hymnal. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat . . ." Lorraine had not yet butchered the chicken she planned to fry for Sunday dinner. The morning had not gone as she had planned. And she was worried--worried about her husband, and the cold and the cattle.

Harve had shaken her awake at dawn with a hand on her shoulder and a full kiss. She got the fire going in the stove and was mixing pancake batter when he came back inside the house. She heard the door, shivered at the rush of cold. He was back too soon, the milk pail swinging empty from the tips of his gloved fingers. His face looked shiny red, as if it had been scrubbed, worn raw. He told her the cattle were loose, scattered and wandering, thanks to a downed fence. Harve needed her help. He said to dress warm, it was cold, bitter.

While Lorraine was pulling on leggings the baby started crying. Ginny still nursed. She slept in a drawer beside their bed. Lorraine couldn't take the time to feed her, not right that minute. Instead, she stuck her head up the stairs and hollered in the direction of the the twins' room, for them to see to the baby.

Lorraine looked down the pew at them, James and Jake, only five but already a big help, sitting still and solemn with their hair neatly combed, next to their sisters. The girls wore baggy tights and dresses Lorraine had sewn them. She'd scrounged the material from sections of her own skirts with wear left in them.

The church was chilly but she had removed the children's coats anyway. Otherwise, when she led them back out into the cold, their small bodies would have been all the more vulnerable--lacked any extra buffer from the wind. Having been accustomed to the warmth and weight of their jackets, they would have been susceptible to the cold. The boys had let her help them out of their jackets without a hitch. Frances and Doris had fought her some. "You'll warm up in a minute," she had whispered. "Sit with your brothers." Each of the boys had allowed one of the girls to squeeze beside him--James with Francis, Jake and Doris. Lorraine smiled at them. She was proud, proud of her children and the way she and Harve had raised them--already she could see how close they were, a good family, kind to one another.

Lorraine watched the priest, Father Callahan. He was a small man, not much taller than she, and mostly bald. He wore spectacles and shot skeptical and disapproving looks over the tops of them. The priest's voice boomed. Lorraine read, "Life is more than food." She shivered.

As she had stepped out the door that morning her belly felt tight with hunger. She and Harve were doing better than many of their neighbors. They had fourteen cows--two milkers--

-a good team of field horses, four sows, one boar, and chickens--lots of chickens, a hearty brood. But they certainly couldn't afford to lose any of the cattle and the weather was not helping. Breakfast would have to wait. Lorraine forgot her stomach as the wind stung her cheeks. Even though all of Canada and North Dakota and most of South Dakota lay between, that wind felt to Lorraine like it had blown straight off an iceberg drifting around the arctic circle.

She spotted Harve off by the hog house hazing several cows toward the barn. She headed in the opposite direction, toward the chicken coop. Her long, dark hair blew across her eyes and she turned her head into the wind, tossing the long strands back from her face. She bent slightly, leaning into the gusts strong enough to throw off her stride. She saw a lone cow behind the outhouse and attempted to call her. The wind whisked her voice like smoke from the stove pipe, lifted it before it got anywhere close to reaching the cow. The animal just stood there, looking cold and dumb. By the time she had hazed it and another two into the corral she could not feel her toes. Her fingers throbbed with cold. Harve told her he could handle the rest. All but two chomped hay inside the corral. He told her she should get out of the weather. She insisted on helping look for the last of them. Harve had to be as frozen as she was if not more. He had been out there longer. They compromised.

Lorraine took the milk cows inside the barn. She breathed with the relief of not fighting the wind. The barn

smelled of dust and hay, shit and cold. Lorraine loved the barn--the rafters choked with bales, its thick air, the echo of her footfalls, the whine of the wind, outside. Within the confines of the stanchion, she felt safe. She milked, her legs splayed to the sides of the low stool, drawing her cold hands down the cow's teats with a gentle pressure. She rested her cheek against the cow's pregnant belly. It felt warm. She imagined the calf folded inside, protected, sheltered. The milk steamed as it shot forth and stung the bucket with the sound and rhythm of a handsaw eating through a board--an easy rhythmic slicing. Her fingers hurt but she knew that that was good, meant the blood was flowing into them and she was alive.

Lorraine set the first bucket aside. She sent the cow out into the barnyard, and fixed the kickers about the joints of the next. The second milker was not pregnant, its belly not swollen. She tried to get close, absorb its warmth, but the positioning was off. Even with cold metal about her joints the cow skittered. Lorraine patted its side, cooed, "Easy girl, easy there." In the time it took her to milk the second cow and fill a second pail, prongs of ice, dagger shaped and pointed, formed and floated across the opaque surface of the first.

Lorraine concentrated on the colored light sifting through the high pointed windows of the church and wincing across the wood floor. It danced about the pews and the suit-coated backs of the men in front of her. It's pretty, she thought. The wind shaking at the windows caused the bounce.

On those rare, still days the red, yellow and blue light did not twitch.

Lorraine knew that much. Her wedding day had been still. . The light poured through the church windows in even, unflinching bands. Blood sounded in her ears. She felt her legs shake. Her knees turned to jelly and her thighs rubbed, brushing skin on skin. Her damp hands shook as Harve pushed the ring down her finger. But the day, outside, was still.

Her mother said it was a sign. A sign from God that blessed their marriage. Lorraine had been relieved to hear it. She did not know that she believed, but if it convinced her mother that was good enough. Her mother had not approved. She said their age difference, nine years, was too great. Her mother said only homemade root beer, dill pickles, and sauerkraut improved with age. Men did not. And if a man stayed a bachelor a long time--well, although she was not a woman given to wagering--you could bet there was a reason.

Remembering her mother's warning, Lorraine emitted a small giggle. The sound surprised her and she clamped her hand across her mouth. Lorraine knew she could not look at James or Jake or she would laugh. Latin rattled off the priest's tongue. She fixed her gaze on her hymnal. "Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them."

Earlier that morning, when Lorraine had stepped inside the kitchen, carrying the buckets of milk, James had Ginny on his lap and each of the other children had a finger in her mouth--three index fingers between the baby's small lips.

Ginny was doing her best to cry. James and Jake insisted the fingers had worked--keeping her quiet for a while--but then Ginny had gummed Doris' pinkie and Doris had squealed. Her sister's voice set Ginny off and she had not quit crying, not been content, since. Lorraine lifted the baby from the throng of her children and sat down and nursed her. She tried to tell herself she loved them all the same, she had no favorites. But that cry, Ginny's cry had drawn her, sent her milk running. The child was hungry. She suckled hard, gumming Lorraine. And it hurt, a good hurt unlike any other--another pain, like the blood warming her fingers, that reminded her she was alive.

When Harve came in, Lorraine was frying bacon and flipping pancakes one handed. She held Ginny because every time she set her down she wailed. The boys were getting dressed for church. The girls, Frances and Doris, were chasing each other with spoons and laughing wildly. Harve poured himself a cup of steaming coffee. Seeing him drinking that coffee brought to Lorraine's mind the day they met.

It had been a cold winter day, not as cold as this one, but cold enough. Everyone had gathered in the basement after mass, catching up on the news--who had died, who had given birth, who had given up and moved to town. Lorraine had been standing off by herself. She was a heavy-set girl, sixteen and strong. Harve, who had seemed so old and foreign to her that he might as well have been the Pope, walked up to her carrying two cups of steaming coffee. He held one out to her and she was so surprised she did not even think to tell him

she didn't drink coffee. Instead, she swallowed a large gulp. It burned bitter on her tongue and down her throat. Had she been at home she would have spit it out. But being in public and standing in front of a man wearing a white shirt under his overalls who seemed to be behaving especially nice towards her, she swallowed. The liquid burned inside her chest and even down inside her belly. With her tongue scalded and swollen and her insides angry, Lorraine could not say a word. On their first wedding anniversary, Harve had told her how much her silence at that first meeting had impressed him. He said if it hadn't been for the serious look on her face and her serious nods at everything he said he might not have taken the time to get to know her.

When the whole family had finally sat down to breakfast that morning, Harve ate quickly. He announced that he would not be going to church. He told Lorraine he had to get that fence fixed. He told her he thought God would understand. It was the first time in the five years they had been married that Harve had missed mass. Lorraine didn't argue. She just got busy with the dishes. By the time she dressed herself and the girls and got the car running, she worried they would be late.

She drove faster than she should have. The car slid as she tried to slow for her turn. The brakes locked. The tires stopped moving but the car did not. They skittered over the ice, out of control, past their turn. Lorraine held the wheel steady. She pumped the brake pedal. They rode out the skid,

stayed out of the ditch. Lorraine took the next corner easily and drove back in the direction of the church. It was just a slide. She promised herself she would be more careful on the way home.

The baby was heavy in Lorraine's arm. She wished Harve was in the pew beside her so he could hold Ginny for a while. Lorraine shivered when she thought of him out there alone, fixing the fence, trying to tug the wire taut and pound it securely under the curve of a nail, fastening it to the post while the wind bore down.

Father Callahan had a deep voice, so booming and full, yet tinged with a hint of kindness, that Lorraine imagined the voice of God to be quite similar. "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" she read in her prayer book. She had no idea if that was what he'd just said, but the rhythm and emphasis sounded right somehow.

Because of all the commotion that morning, Lorraine had not had a chance to butcher the chicken like she had planned. Dinner would be late which would push back the children's naps which would result in their not wanting to go to sleep at a decent hour that night. Lorraine felt weary enough to crawl into her own bed just thinking about it. The priest's back was turned. The words she read seemed to be speaking directly to her. "Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. . . .seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

The sermon was short. Father Callahan faced the congregation and implored them, in these tough times to trust in the Lord, to hold fast to their faith. "Just as God cares for and provides for the birds in the sky and the flowers in the fields so too does he nurture each one of us. Trust in him and you will secure your place for all eternity." The voice flew from the small man and seemed to echo off the high ceiling, the gilt walls, reverberate on the cold air.

Lorraine spotted Harve's nephew Eddie. As tall as he was it would have been hard not to. Eddie was big through the shoulders, huge even, with massive hands. He was only a few years younger than Lorraine. He was in church with his girl, Irene. They hadn't been going together long but it looked to Lorraine like both parties were quite smitten. The girl was young still, probably only fourteen or so, but Lorraine suspected that in a few years, once her parents gave the okay, they'd settle in on Eddie's place and start a family of their own.

The congregation stood and petitioned the Lord for moisture and a good calving season. They prayed that all people have food to eat and a warm place to sleep. They prayed for an end to suffering, for relief from the harsh economic times, and for warmer weather and better days ahead. And the priest rushed on through mass, praying and singing in Latin that lifted from him as easy and quick as breath.

Lorraine decided that like everyone else Father Callahan was anxious to get home where it was warm and stay there. That's what she prayed for, to get home and have dinner and

put her children down for their naps, to sit by the stove with her fancy work, to check on her babies and watch them sleep. She wanted to see them warm, curled against one another beneath the covers, hear the buzz of their soft snores, watch the rise and fall of their chests, and their lashes lush, extending from their closed lids like feathery brushes.

While people were still coming back from Communion she fastened the children into their coats and fixed heavy socks over their hands. She took care with Ginny, wrapped her first in soft flannel and then heavy wool. Lorraine's sister Mamie knelt at the end of their pew, blocking their exit down the side aisle. Lorraine tied her scarf under her chin, stood, and tapped Mamie's shoulder. "Excuse us," she whispered. "We have to get on home." Mamie sat back and twisted to the side like it pained her while they filed past--first the twins, James and Jake. They stood in the aisle and waited for Frances and Doris. James took Frances' hand and Jake Doris'--the way Lorraine had taught them. The boys listened well. Lorraine had come to depend on them. "I've got more babies than hands," she would say as she ruffled the soft waves about their heads and asked them to watch their sisters or sent them out to feed and water the chickens.

Watching her children, Lorraine felt blessed. They were all healthy, chubby cheeked with shiny brown hair. Her husband worked hard. He was a good and decent man. Lorraine had no doubt times would improve. The twins were getting old enough to be serious help and the girls were right on their

heels. They were bound to get more rain this year than they had last. And she had heard that a winter this hard killed off the grasshoppers before they had a chance to hatch. With Ginny secure in the crook of her arm, Lorraine genuflected, crossed herself, and ushered her children toward the heavy church doors as chords rose from the organ for the final hymn.

Chapter 2

The wind whined, whistling high and sad. Lorraine's eyes watered and frost crusted along her lashes. The world shimmered. Fields stretching out from town glowed white with cold and sun. In the hard morning light, with everything frozen still but the wind, Lorraine wished she were already home sitting beside the warm stove with the dinner dishes done, her babies napping, and her fancy-work in her lap. She settled the children in the back seat of the Model-T. James scrambled in first. The girls sat in the middle, their tights bagging around their ankles. Lorraine set Ginny in James' arms and covered their laps with a big, heavy blanket. Lorraine went around front and cranked the starter.

The Model-T had canvas curtains where later models had windows, an engine that roared even at an idle, and narrow, almost bicycle-size, tires. The road was slick. She drove slow, squinting into the brightness. She saw spots of hazy blue dancing in front of her as if she had looked straight into the sun. The twins argued about dinner, whose turn it was to have the wishbone. Frances and Doris joined in. They had learned already that if there was something their brothers wanted, they probably wanted it too. The windshield frosted on the inside. Lorraine removed one of her gloves. The icy layers peeled away as she scraped the glass with her nails. Ginny began to fuss, whimpers that Lorraine knew would give way to full out crying soon enough.

Lorraine yelled over the rumble of the motor and the children's voices that she had half a mind to let the bird live. With a smile, she said that unless they all hushed she would cook oatmeal and they could do their wishing on the lumps.

James tucked the knuckle of a bent finger inside Ginny's mouth. She suckled. Her cheeks caved with each unsatisfying draw. Everyone inside the car fell silent. As they started up the small rise that held the railroad track, the vehicle coughed and stalled. Lorraine listened to the wind. It rushed inside the car billowing the curtains like ghosts, ruffling their length so they lifted and fell in waves.

She got out. Her breath clouded white in front of her. Wisps of her hair flew across her face. She bent and cranked the starter. Nothing. She turned her back to the biting wind and gave it another go--both hands on the cold metal, her teeth ground tight. She said a prayer and swung her weight behind the crank--swung with all her might, swung it with strength born of desperation.

The engine choked to life. Its boom, the whine of the wind, and the thick scarf over her ears blocked all but the sounds inside her head. Harve had told her, *Take the tracks at an angle, ride's smoother at a slant*. He drilled it into her, said over and over how ramroding straight across jarred the body. Lorraine veered sharp to the right. Too sharp. The front wheel caught between the far rail and the tie. The children were silent. Lorraine shook with cold. She wished once again she was home and warm, seated by the stove, her

children sleeping solid in their beds. She tried backing up. She tried going forward. Lorraine gave a thought to crying--considered for a moment allowing herself that luxury--but she knew it would not help. She tried going forward again. The tire wedged tighter.

Harve slammed the door behind himself as though, with enough fury, he could shut out the cold. He took off his boots and unbuttoned his coat but kept it on. He went straight to the cook stove. Wind whistled across the flue. The iron door creaked in protest as he drew it open and piled cobs inside. Flames rose up from the clumps of black-grey ash and nicked the dirty white combs. Kernels had once sat snug, measured and orderly tapering smaller to the tip down their length. The sight--just the look of an ear of corn, its symmetrical beauty--was for Harve, evidence of God's existence. The stove door whined as he pushed it closed, as if even it resented the weather. Harve moved slow and stiff with cold. His nose ran. His cheeks burned. He set the coffee on to heat and blew his nose into the handkerchief he kept in the back pocket of his overalls. Harve kept his pipe and tobacco in a high cupboard and for special occasions. Having the house to himself warranted a celebration. He sat in a kitchen chair by the window puffing on his pipe, watching the tree branches of the shelterbelt bow in the wind.

The cattle had plenty of hay. The draft horses were safe in the barn. The hog house was freezing. He'd built it with gaps between the slats with the intention of keeping the

smell down. The result was that whatever the outside temperature, that was also pretty much the temperature inside the hog house. The pigs didn't seem to mind it. They wallowed in the mud warm with their shit and piss. They huddled in a broad mass, making the most of their togetherness. Harve felt warm enough to remove his coat and got up to place it on the hook by the door. He poured himself a cup of coffee, taking pleasure in the rise and swirl of steam. He returned to his place at the head of the table clutching the cup with both hands, feeling the warmth of it seep into his palms. The cold raged in desperate gusts beyond the window. Harve felt the quiet of the house, felt it down to his bones, the rare stillness, no children--no small voices making demands. And he would remember always, until the day he walked out and away for good, how he had sat sipping his coffee, relishing his aloneness.

Eddie stood in church holding his sweetheart, Irene's hand. She stood beside him, singing. Eddie had seen his Aunt Lorraine leave early, shuffle her brood from the church. He had noticed Harve was not at mass. He hoped his uncle wasn't sick. He planned to take Irene over there for a visit after dinner. They would sit in the kitchen, near the warmth of the stove and visit.

Lorraine knew she had to go back out, fight the wind. She turned and looked at her children. They sat wide-eyed and quiet. "Soon," she said to them, "We'll be home soon." Jake

nodded at her like he approved and pulled the blanket higher on his sisters, tucking it around their legs. James made faces at Ginny. Her cubby cheeks broke with a grin. Her gums showed when she giggled and she looked, more than anything, Lorraine thought, like an old woman.

Lorraine pulled her collar up over the back of her neck and stepped from the car. It was then that she saw the train, the black steel spewing smoke, barreling closer. A circle of yellow light sat snug below its smoke stack like a portal. She heard the whistle, heard it like a scream, the shrill howl over the steady, labored rumble of the train bearing down. The track rattled. The ground shook. She reached Ginny. Flung her clear. She looked over her shoulder and knew that there was no time. Lorraine saw her life--not the life she had lived but the life she would live if she dove. A life full of the same things--milking, weeding, canning, and butchering, wind and dirt and sky--but without her children. Without respite or rest. She flashed on an existence mired in missing, wrung dry of joy, blanched by loss. She heard one of the girls cry, call out, call to her. Lorraine ducked back inside. She lay across her little ones like a blanket, tried to shield them with her body.

The train sliced through the car, drawing Lorraine and the children beneath the wheels. One after the other those wheels tore at them, rolled and rolled hugging the track, pressing fingers flat, crushing heels and hands and hair. The wheels spun, grinding bone and breath, churning into the distance, spilling steam in a searing slash of heat.

Chapter 3

The parishioners and good people of Epiphany heard the crash, the scrape of metal on metal, and ran like scalded hounds, too late to do anything but gape. The car lay sprawled, split, not quite half of it on either side of the tracks. The wind billowed the curtains. They lifted and fell, rose and dipped, like waves.

When the knock came, it startled Harve. He had dozed. It was late, almost noon. Lorraine and the children should have been home by now. He worried about her and that car. He loved Lorraine, but she was a hideous driver, hideous. And since he was the one who taught her, well, he wasn't sure what that said about him. One thing he knew, driving, like most skills, was easier to learn young. Harve didn't think it was right that Lorraine's father hadn't taken the time to teach her. No way would he send his daughters out into the world without knowing some basics.

The knock came again, hard, insistent. His chair scraped the floor. With a stocking cap drawn low and the coat buttoned high over the mouth, Harve could not tell who it was. He opened the door wide and as the person moved inside he saw that it was a woman. She pulled off her hat and the hair loose from her bun sprung straight from her head like quills. Harve recognized the girl. She was the one his nephew was sweet on, a good Catholic from a good family. Helen? Kathleen? Harve couldn't recall. She was a sturdy girl, thick waisted and busty but nice enough. Today she

struck Harve as nervous. He offered her coffee. The girl shook her head. Adamant, she told him to get his coat. "Prepare yourself," she said. Harve thought she was referring to the cold and scoffed. He'd spent all morning out there. Who did she think she was talking to? But he did as she said. He slipped his arm in his coat and she said, "The crossing." She shook her head. "It's pretty bad." Harve thought of Lorraine and the children. An idea dropped like a seed into the pit of his stomach where it sprouted and bloomed. He stopped and looked at the girl, this stranger in his kitchen. He stared at her mouth, her full girl lips.

"What is it," he asked quietly, "what did you come to tell me?"

"They're gone," she whispered.

Harve arrived and stared up at the track. To his surprise Eddie placed Ginny in his arms. He had thought, thought it had got all of them. She lay swaddled, her eyes big as nickels, silent. Harve cradled the squirming bundle of her body against his chest and climbed the slope. He could feel her breath, the heat of it on his skin. He concentrated on its warmth, the sensation of her breathing tickling his neck, drawing to an itch. An itch that grew and spread, an itch that ached. He clutched her, tight.

They looked to be floating, Harve and Ginny, veiled by the vapor feathering high and white. He set out down the tracks, his face raised skyward, headed for home.

For the rest of his life Harve never once got inside a car. It wasn't easy, but he managed. And every Sunday, each and every Sunday, no matter what the weather, he walked the four miles into church, crossing himself at the railroad track.

Eddie and Father Callahan walked the line and combed the grass, gathering remains. What they collected in a bundled blanket; an ear, severed limbs, teeth, and viscera, was barely enough to constitute one body, let alone five. The cold became too much. And finally, they turned and started back toward town. Blood stained the track for miles, past where the parallel bars of iron met and sunk below the horizon, farther than the mind could know.

Chapter 4

Sunlight screamed down the day of the funeral, bouncing from snow to sky and back again, unrelenting and bright. With the ground froze solid, burying Lorraine and the children had to wait. With the help of his neighbors, Harve strung the single coffin from the rafters of the hog house. The smell of shit and slop sent the men out the door until it was just Harve and Eddie and the pigs. Harve stared up at the pine box hanging from the ropes. Without a word he stepped forward and landed his boot solid against the side of a sow. Eddie heard the hollow thump. The squeal that pealed from that animal sent the coffin swaying. Harve took off. He grabbed his ax as he passed the wood pile and made for the shelterbelt.

Inside the house Eddie thanked people for coming, thanked them for the sausage and breads and pies they brought, offered it back to them, sliced and plated. He spoke briefly with Father Callahan who assured Eddie that just as soon as the ground thawed, as soon as possible, he would have a grave dug in the cemetery and conduct the burial. Father said a prayer for an early spring. It wasn't right, he said, to have those bodies hanging loose in the world. Eddie said they weren't loose, they were in the hog house and immediately regretted it. Eddie assured the priest that the coffin would be fine, the bodies would stay frozen--it wasn't more than a degree or two warmer than outside in that building thanks to the openings between the slats meant to air the place out. And then Eddie realized that when he'd

said "loose in the world," the priest had been speaking of their souls.

Lorraine's older sister, unmarried and severe looking in her tight bun and high collared black dress, passed Ginny among the women. They took turns with her feeding and burping and changing. But Lorraine's sister had taken charge of overseeing that which pertained to the baby. All the while Eddie heard the steady crack of the ax.

He pulled on his coat and went to talk sense into Harve. He shaded his eyes with his hand. The first line of trees was down, a jumble of leafless branches. Harve had shed his shirt and jacket. Patches of sweat darkened his union suit.

"Harve," Eddie said, careful not to get too close, "you'll make yourself sick." Harve did not so much as turn or nod or in any way acknowledge that he was no longer alone. Harve kept chopping, sinking the metal edge in wood.

One by one the friends and relatives left. Eddie thanked them all once again. Lorraine's older sister, Mamie, wanted to take Ginny with her. Eddie said no. He put his foot down. Even though she scared him, he told the woman that she would have to take that business up with Harve. He told her if Ginny left this house it would have to be Harve's decision. And frankly, Eddie said, that baby probably constituted a huge portion of what might keep Harve going. Taking her away was probably the worst thing, the very worst thing, any of them could do.

After Mamie left, Eddie bundled Ginny and took her out to check on Harve. Over half the shelterbelt lay strewn across the ground. Ashamed, but willing to try anything, Eddie reached inside the blankets and pinched Ginny's chubby arm, hard. She wailed--a gasping cry ridden with patches of silence as she geared up for her next burst. Eddie hollered, "She needs you. Your daughter is alive and she needs you." The ax bit past bark, into the center. When a tree cracked and started to fall Harve gave it a push, stomped over it and took to the next one. The fading sun streaked the clouds purple and darkness leaked into the sky.

Eddie took Ginny back inside. He rocked her. He thought about his uncle and tried to put himself in his place. Harve had seen his family cut to steam. Eddie did not yet have a family of his own. He tried to imagine if that had been his wife, his children . . . But he wound up pleading with God, begging for amnesty from anything like that wreck. After Ginny fell asleep he still held her--dreading how, when he set her down in the blanket-padded drawer, the warmth of her would lift from his body and where she had lain against him would feel colder than if he'd never held her at all.

Harve chopped on into the night until he had felled every ash, elm, and box elder. He stood on a stump in the moonlight, completely spent. His ax dangled limply from his fist. He stood surrounded by piles of broken, splintered limbs, looking up at the sky.

In the morning Eddie found him, just inside the door, asleep on the kitchen floor.

Harve never burned that wood. He left the trees where they fell, left them to rot.

Chapter 5

Harve could not hear the knock at the front door. He was pounding nails, slamming the hammer down loud and steady. It was two days after the funeral. Two days since he'd strung the single coffin from the rafters of the hog house.

Harve drove the nails into the smooth lengths of board he had fixed across the opening to the stairwell. The stairs rose steep, no hallway just an opening shooting up off the back of the kitchen. The children had slept up there, the twins in the north room, the girls in the south. The ceiling in those second story rooms crept and angled into crannies, mimicking the slope and set of the roof. Heat from the stove was getting sucked into those upper reaches, languishing up there where it wasn't doing any good.

With the funeral over and the friends and relatives gone back to their own lives, the quiet settled and Harve had noticed the draft. Air swept through the kitchen. The stove throbbed with heat, churned it out--but the warmth rose, lifted on thick currents, disappearing up the stairs. Harve was glad for the project--blocking the heat's escape--something to occupy him while Ginny napped.

The knocking came sharper, more insistent, but Harve still did not hear it. He was absorbed in his work, bringing the hammer down against the nail heads, sinking them flush in three solid swats. Seven nails poked from between his pressed lips, their points in a thick metal line. More weighed heavy in the pocket of his overalls. Harve thought about the baby, Ginny, finally asleep in the back bedroom, snug in the drawer

on the floor next to Lorraine's side of the bed. She had not been eating for him. He resolved to add sugar to the milk he warmed on the stove--try and make it taste more like the breast milk she was used to. It made him uncomfortable how the baby would burrow to his chest, smacking and sucking. Her small fists opening and closing, her fingers tensing and curling like she was trying to grasp something familiar and always, time and time again, coming up empty. Maybe, he thought, the whole thing would go better if he set her down, didn't try and hold her while he fed her. Maybe it was the warmth, being up next to a body while she ate that made Ginny miss Lorraine.

Harve felt a rush of cold. He arched his shoulders against it and lowered his hammer. The nail he was driving remained only partially sunk. It stuck out mean, ready to snag anything that came within reach. Cold fingers pressed the back of Harve's neck. He opened his mouth and the nails fell. One by one they dropped--bounced and rattled against the wood floor. They rolled and rocked, turning on the edges of their broad heads. Harve looked over his shoulder. The woman said, "I've come for the baby."

Lorraine's sister had a small chin, a sharp nose, thin lips. She was hard edged where Lorraine had been soft. Her brown hair was fastened in a bun so taut it pulled at the corners of her eyes, drew them narrow. The collar of her dark dress buttoned high and tight over the cords of her neck.

Mamie had not always looked this way. The first time Harve had seen her, she was lovely. It had been the height of

summer, years before he met Lorraine. It seemed impossible to him now, that there had been a time when he had not known his wife. But there had been and during that time he had known her older sister, Mamie.

Harve had sat on the corral fence, his boot heels braced against a low board, looking across his fields. The corn stood stunted, the small leaves bristling in the breeze. The land was parched--every drop of moisture sucked away, lost to the heat of the mid-day sun. The alfalfa field looked even sadder--a stretch of fragile, tawny-tipped sprigs. Harve wanted to turn the rows under, bury the plants beneath the loose dry dirt where he wouldn't have to watch them wither. There was no way he'd be able to put up enough hay for winter. He collected the Russian thistles that rolled across the pasture until they caught and piled along the fence. When the ground froze and the snow drifted and the hay ran out, he would salt the brittle weeds and feed them to the cattle.

The wind rose, moved insistent across the corn. Harve spotted a dark sliver in the distance, making its way up his road. He wasn't expecting anyone. Sometimes his nephew Eddie stopped by for a cup of coffee and a smoke. But Eddie rode an old mare. This person walked, moved steady and smooth, shimmering in the hard sun. The shape of the dark figure rolled and wavered, bled along the edges. From where Harve sat, whoever it was appeared shiny wet and somehow cool.

As she drew closer Harve saw that the girl carried a bright metal pail. Her black skirt swirled about her ankles. She was bare-headed and long thick strands flew free from her

braid. She turned her face to the wind. It tossed the hair back out of her eyes, lifted and floated it like a horse's tail. She came even with Harve where he sat on the fence. She smiled and lifted the bucket. The sun glanced off its surface like a beacon. For a moment Harve stared into the white ball of light, then clamped his eyes tight and turned away.

"Eggs," the girl said. And when he looked at her he saw a blue-black hole spinning in the center of her face, blocking her features. The wind kicked up bits of dirt that stung his skin. Harve asked how much and she asked how many. He agreed to buy all she had, seven eggs for a dime. It was more than they were worth. Harve knew that. But she had brought them right to him, walked a long way on a hot afternoon. He jumped down from his perch and led her across the yard toward the house.

The wind blew harder. Dust filled the air. Harve tasted the grit, ran his tongue across his teeth. He slammed the front door hard behind them.

"This all yours?" she asked. Her voice was bright, expectant. Harve nodded. He told her his parents were gone, buried. His said his older brothers had moved on, staked their own claims. She said she had seen him in church, sitting off in a pew by himself. And as she said it, her skin went rosy. Harve watched the blush creep high on her cheeks. She smiled at him and crossed the room to the table. Outside, the dirt flew fierce, sheeting through the air, obscuring the sunlight. The dust blew so thick Harve could not see the shelterbelt. It was as though the house had been boxed off

from the rest of the world. The girl unwrapped an egg from the layers of flour-sack cloth. The room dimmed to the thin yellow tint of late evening. Harve lit a candle. The flame threw skittering shadows on the wall. He watched her thin fingers work the eggs free from the strips of cotton. She held each one gently and set it on the table with the others. Harve reached into the pail. He felt the soft cloth. His fingers met her warm steady hand. He pulled back startled, wishing he had not tried to help, never having meant to touch her. The bucket tipped. Two eggs rolled out, wobbled across the table and dropped, one after the other. Harve reached out and caught them both, an egg cupped in the palm of each of his hands. He knelt on the floor holding the eggs and the girl knelt down beside him. The world went dark with dirt--dust that eddied and funneled, drawing fuel from the ground, swirling the earth up and away.

She leaned her face toward him. She smelled of heavy sun and sweat, deep and warm. Harve closed his eyes. She pressed her lips to his cheek. Her mouth was soft, wet. Her tongue found his. The girl tasted salty and good.

He stood and set the eggs on the table, licked his thumb and forefinger and pinched the flame. A wisp of smoke lifted off the wick. Harve led the girl back through the house, past the windows walled by flying darkness, led her back to the far room, to his bed.

The wind sang, rattling the windows, driving dust in along the cracks and crannies. Dirt fluttered under the door,

feathered in along the window frames, sprinkled down on the fresh eggs.

The wind died. The dust settled. Harve pressed a dime into the girl's hand and she left, went back down the road, the way she had come. Her skirts swished about her ankles. Harve didn't even know her name.

He fried two of the eggs--the two he had snatched from the air--for supper. He walked the pasture, crushing the dry grass to dust under his boots, and called the cattle home. He secured his herd in the confines of the corral.

That night he could not sleep. He gathered the eggs up from the table, cradled them against his chest and bore them out into the night. He thought of her, her body, what he had given himself over to--unordained urges. He felt ashamed of his weakness. Harve gathered the eggs, bore them out into the night and threw them, one by one into the shelterbelt. He listened. He tried to hear them break, crack against the trees, break to the ground--but his head was too full of worry.

Early the next morning, directly after chores, he drove to town. The air held the only coolness it would contain all day. Wind rushed in through the curtains covering the windows of the Model-T. Harve drove into town embarrassed by the high whine of the engine, wishing it would churn more quietly--wishing it did not matter to him, wanting nothing to be ashamed of.

He had to rouse Father Callahan from bed. It was not easy. The priest slept sound. Harve banged the door of the parsonage until his knuckles burned red with the effort.

Father Callahan answered in his night clothes, his hair rough from sleep. "I sinned," Harve said. Father opened the door wide, invited him in. The smell of grease, last night's dinner, hung in the air. The house was warm. The priest made them coffee, sweetened it heavy with sugar, dulled it with milk.

At his kitchen table, Father Callahan heard Harve's confession. "Adultery," Harve said. "I had relations with a woman who is not my wife." Steam rose from the cups. "Forgive me."

The priest's eyes were blue and kind. He absolved Harve while still wearing his night shirt. He assigned a penance of Hail Marys, prayers to the virgin imploring her restraint. Father Callahan held his mug and lifted and lowered it, drew it side to side, across Harve's center--making the sign of the cross. "Go in peace," the priest said. "To serve the Lord."

And Harve did. He left free, his soul wiped clean. To his mind, the whole thing was done, over. Several times the girl came back, carrying the pail. Harve spotted her, the dark dot moving down the road, growing larger with every step, and hid. Harve hid in the hay loft and the shelterbelt. He hid behind the hog house and in the out house. He hid upstairs and in the back room, the far back room of the house--still and quiet, waiting for the knocking to cease.

And when the weather turned and the snow fell, the girl quit coming.

Harve did not see her again. He convinced himself he never would. He lived within the comfort of that belief until his wedding day. On that day he had stood in the sun, next to Lorraine outside the church. People poured passed and wished them well. Lorraine introduced him to Mamie, her oldest sister just back from teaching in Nebraska--in a one room school near Valentine. Harve shook the woman's hand. He noted her thin fingers and long nails. His heart raced. His knees shook. His mouth went dry.

Later, at the dance, Mamie led him out onto the floor for a waltz. She pressed her body against him, held him tight. Three old men played their accordions with gusto, pumping out music while half the county scooted in time across the powdered plank floor. Mamie put a hand to the back of his neck and drew his head down, drew it down until his ear was even with her mouth. Her voice was cold, "Eggs don't come so cheap anymore," she said. He watched her walk off, her steps brisk, leaving him alone in the midst of a swarm of dancers.

He never spoke a word of any of it to Lorraine. And to his knowledge, Mamie didn't either. In all the years since, Harve had given Mamie a wide berth, avoiding family gatherings where her presence was imminent, making excuses to be off helping a neighbor when she visited Lorraine and the children. He had never so much as spoke the woman's name to Lorraine, afraid that even that much would somehow betray

him. And what good had it done? What had any of it mattered--because now Lorraine was gone and here was Mamie, standing in his kitchen--her eyes small and narrow, her hair clumped tight at the nape of her neck, demanding his daughter. "Ginny is sleeping," he said.

"I don't believe you." Mamie said it like a dare. "I need to see my niece."

Harve led her, once again, through the house to the back bedroom. Mamie's skirts rustled as she walked in her quick little steps, tiny steps that made Harve remember Lorraine's energy, how strong and sure and capable she'd been. She could cross a room and have one of the children in her lap before Harve registered their cry.

Harve and Mamie stood in the doorway. "Well," she said, "I see Lorraine kept the furniture the same."

Harve lifted his finger to his lips. It felt gratifying to shush her. Weak winter light leaked in through the window. The temperature had risen enough for it to snow. Flakes were drifting intermittent and slow--as if each of them demanded a person's attention. Ginny lay in her drawer. Her cheeks were fat. She had hardly any hair. Harve had taken to calling her baldy. His bull was a black baldy--commanding and hearty--the child could do far worse than turn out like that. Mamie started into the room, took one step, setting the heel of her boot down loud on the wood floor. Harve grabbed her. He shook his head ever so slightly. He kept his hand there, on her arm, and with gentle pressure turned her and drew her out of the room.

She settled herself at the kitchen table with an ease and confidence that made Harve bristle. He got down a clean cup, poured it full of steaming coffee and set it in front of her. He filled the cup he'd been using for days and set the pot back on the stove. The coffee was thick black. Harve added fresh grounds in the morning and left it to simmer all day. He didn't offer cream. He told himself he was saving it for Ginny when really he didn't want Mamie enjoying her coffee, getting too comfortable in his kitchen.

"I can help," she said.

"You can't bring them back." Harve sat across from her. He looked out at what had been his shelterbelt but was now a mass of broken limbs. It surprised him a little every time he saw it. He had chopped down his own windbreak.

"You should move this table," Mamie said. "Get it away from the window. You don't want," she paused, gesturing to the pile of slash, "'that' staring you in the face at every meal." But actually, that was precisely what Harve wanted. He worried about forgetting. Already, he couldn't quite recall whether it was Francis or Doris who sneezed around the horses or which of the twins had been afraid of salamanders. Harve hoped, every time he sat down at his table, to be reminded. He watched the snow, watched the white puffs float down and collect--millions of tiny bits joined into a presence--a layer upon the earth--that come spring would melt back, seep away.

Mamie sipped her coffee and made a sour face. She said, "Every baby needs a mother."

Harve wanted to ask her what she knew about babies. What she knew about caring for an infant. Mamie was almost twenty-six, single, a school teacher. "I'm used to babies," he said. "We had four others. Four before Ginny."

Mamie got up and poured her coffee in the slop bucket. She stood over Harve, looking down. "There was a time," she said, "when I had something you wanted. Now it's the other way around." She almost smiled. "I will do the cooking and cleaning and care for the child. You can go about your business--like usual."

Mamie was right. Harve knew no more about babies than he did about baking bread, canning beef, or making a decent cup of coffee. But this woman, having her around rubbing his nose in his biggest regret, making him feel ashamed all over again, she would make his choice too easy, a given.

There was a lot Harve didn't know, but he did know what not to do. His draft horse had once got caught in a knot of barbed wire. A section of fence was down and by the time Harve found him, he'd ripped the post clean out of the ground. A nail twisted sharp, out from the wood. The horse jumped and twirled--blew its nostrils huge and snorted. He kicked--winding the mess of wire tight. The barbs pierced his hide. His thrashing dragged the nail deep, down his flank. The horse screamed as only horses scream--a high cry that rattled Harve's teeth. Blood ran. Rivulets of red streaked

his dirty brown coat. And the more he hurt, the more he felt caught--the harder the horse fought.

Harve tried to sneak in low with the wire cutters. The horse pulled back and landed a hoof in his side. The blow struck the soft place between Harve's ribs and hip and lifted him into the air, propelled him, tossed him like a ball. When he hit the ground, Harve pressed the side of his head into the dirt and tried to swallow breath. For those long moments without air, the world became tinged in blue. Harve watched his horse, its mane flying, its eyes huge, lips pulled back from long yellow teeth. The horse bucked impossibly, fighting a thing that could not be fought. Harve saw rage and terror, hurt on hurt. He saw his horse glow. He watched the blue light fade. Lying there on the hard dry ground, aching for air, Harve felt small and empty.

Harve knew better than to fight. He refused to try and wrestle his way free of his new circumstances. He would not struggle to accommodate his loss and loneliness. He would keep farming as best he could, and if it didn't work--well, he had a plan for that too. He wondered if he could take care of it with one bullet--hold the baby against his chest, fix it so it would rip through her straight into him, so he would never have to see her dead.

Ginny wailed. A demanding cry from the back room. Mamie turned, intent on going to her. Harve squeezed the woman's skirt and tugged. "You're right," he said. "I did wrong. And I'm sorry for that." Harve stood up from the table. "But I

won't have my daughter living with my mistakes." He let go of the fabric, dropped it like it was burning him. "Now, you need to go." The baby cried--louder, harder. Harve walked Mamie to the door.

Cold rushed in. "God help you," she said. "God have mercy." Mamie walked out through the soft falling snow, back the way she had come.

Harve changed Ginny's diaper. Dressed her in clean dry clothes. He cooked her a bit of oatmeal and mixed it with straight cream, sprinkled sugar across the top. He held her on his lap and she ate it. She smiled and the food fell out of her mouth and down her chin. Harve wiped her face with his handkerchief.

He had a job to finish. The opening to the stairwell still gaped. He could feel the heat escaping, flowing up the stairs into those far empty corners. But every time he set Ginny down on her blanket in front of the stove, she screamed. She called him back before he had even crossed the room to the nail that still poked, vicious, from a high board.

Harve sat down with her at the table. He pulled the straps of his overalls loose as they could go and unfastened a buckle. He slipped Ginny in behind the bib and settled the denim across her chest, up under her arms. He refastened the buckle and tightened both straps so the baby pressed snug against him. The pressure made his blood thump--a sure, solid pounding. The baby's head poked forward, her arms dangled.

She seemed happy. Harve held her to him and walked carefully to the stairwell. He let go, threw his arms open, and Ginny stayed there, fastened to him, wiggling and warm. Harve lifted his hammer and drove the nail, home.

Chapter 6

After breakfast, while the baby still slept, Harve fashioned a sling of tea towels which he knotted at his neck. He had decided the key, the only way, was for he and Ginny to stick together. Then whatever happened to one of them would happen to the other. If he'd followed this principle from the git go--always sticking close to his family--he would never have found himself in this situation to begin with. He would have been with them in the car. He would have been driving. And if the wheel had gotten stuck just the same, and the train had been coming, well at least he would have been with them.

Sitting at the table beside the window Harve could tell by the air leaking in, by the coolness emanating off the pane, that the temperature had risen above zero. The wind was down. Heat poured off the stove and for the first time since that last night he had lain in bed with Lorraine, Harve felt warm.

Harve drained the coffee from his cup. He hated to wake Ginny but he had to get out there and get the cows milked. The last several days had played havoc with their schedule and if he wasn't careful they would start drying up.

Ginny's eyes fluttered open as he wrapped her blankets tight about her body and settled her in the sling. He kept her snug inside his coat on the way to the barn, crossing his arms over the bundle that lay against his ribs. She awoke and cried some but at least he had her right there. There where he could see nothing was really wrong.

Inside the barn dust motes floated in shafts of sun. He spotted the wheel barrel and maneuvered it to the side of the milking stall. Several handfuls of straw created a cushion along its deep bottom. Ginny bawled when he laid her down. He convinced himself her wailing was a kind of music. He called the milk cows inside, moving to the rhythm of the baby's cries.

He felt badly for Ginny, that she'd been weaned so suddenly. Her eating was sporadic at best. She cried long desperate cries that wracked her whole body. When the milking was done and Harve carried the buckets of milk to the house, she shook with her crying in the sling settled just below his chest. He felt her there, cradled against him, all day long. He had to adjust the way he did things. He moved more slowly, with greater care--he wasn't sure how safe the setup was but he could not think of any other way. He kept the wheel barrow close and when feeding the hogs or working the cattle set her safely aside. Harve decided Ginny missed Lorraine, missed her terribly--Lorraine's warm and ample body. He worried about the missing, how it seemed to shudder through the baby, add to that the lack of sustenance and she could be done in. It happened. Babies died. In lots of ways everything would be that much simpler.

When she finally slept, she slept hard and still. He waited to fix his dinner till mid-afternoon when after solid hours of wailing she'd worn herself out and closed her eyes. Harve headed inside the house and set her in the drawer. Then he went back to the kitchen to scare up a meal--a fried egg

and either toast or fried potatoes to go with it. Dinner looked a lot like breakfast which strongly resembled supper. But the one thing Harve had plenty of was eggs. And it wasn't like he tasted the food much anyway.

He liked the pop and crackle of the grease in the skillet, the bubble and burst of the egg cooking solid. He liked that cooking in the same dirty skillet meal after meal and day after day cut down on the clean up. He rinsed his plate and fork and that was it--the dishes were done. If Lorraine could she this, he shook his head at the thought and smiled, she was cringing. He liked his eggs with the yoke broke and cooked thin like a slice of cheese--nothing to remind him his meal could have just as well become a chick, that given a few months of feed he could have been having fried chicken.

While Ginny slept Harve checked on her. He sometimes thought he heard something, a rustling or a whimper, and checked between bites. He checked every time he got up to get the salt or pepper or refill his coffee cup. He looked in on her just to make sure. He needed to know she was there, breathing, still with him. She lay so still, so stiff, her eyes barely closed, a sliver of the white showing, he wondered. Usually before he allowed the idea to take hold he stepped quietly into the room and placed his hand under the blanket, his palm against her chest, felt the give, the in and out of her lungs ballooning and sinking in, expelling breath.

Every once in a while, not often, he stood in that door, swallowed the bite of egg stiff and rubbery in his mouth, flavorless, and let himself think about it. Harve knew what he would do if she died. Maybe it was a sin, that's what the church taught, but he wouldn't have a choice. He'd leave a note signing everything over to Eddie. He would go behind the house, to the middle of the pile of downed limbs. A gun would be quickest.

Night was the hardest. Ginny's crying startled him from sleep. When he reached down and lifted her up into the bed she stopped just as quickly as she'd started. He lay there under the feather tick, listing, listening to the wind, and thought about his boys. They would have grown into big men, strong. You could already tell by their outsized hands and feet. They were smart too, quick for five. Jake had the better coordination and James was a mite sharper when it came to thinking things through. Sometimes it was like that boy was reading Harve's mind, anticipating his moves before he made them, handing him a pliers or a wrench the second before he knew he needed it. Other folks had trouble telling the boys apart but it was easy for Harve. He could see the way their minds worked different on their faces, in their wide set brown eyes. Jake was always thinking of fun or his stomach or how to brute-wrestle things into being how he wanted them. James, on the other hand always took a step back and reasoned things out. He could think the possibilities through and was already a whiz at checkers. Harve had been

planning on teaching him chess. He had told him he thought he'd make a good engineer. Harve told Jake he knew no matter what the boy chose to do, he'd have a good time doing it.

Harve thought his girls had looked just as much, if not more, alike than his boys. Given the year between them, there was difference in height, but still he got their names mixed up. Frances tried to keep up with her brothers. She liked to be included in their games or their Saturday evening wrestling on the living room rug.

Those nights Harve would lie on his back and pretend he was a wolf. He'd howl and the kids would run around him, circling him trying to reach in and poke him. Harve would curl his fingers like claws and reach out. Occasionally he would lock on a wrist or ankle and then draw the child to him, cradling and tickling. The game would continue until each of the four had been caught and coddled. It always involved a ruckus--screams and shouts of half horror, half glee. Lorraine hadn't cared for the game. They played it while she bathed with the baby in the the washtub in the kitchen.

James and Jake and Frances and Doris ran in circles around Harve splayed out on the floor. He loved catching each of them, lifting them, noting how they were growing. He ruffled their damp hair. The smell of soap lingered on their skin. He inhaled the fresh scent of them, like laundry dried in the sun. They wore their pajamas, warm flannels soft from a million washings. Lorraine had scrubbed their skin to a

sheen and their cheeks were flushed. Harve had looked forward to Saturday nights.

Lying there in the dark, Lorraine's side of the bed was cold. Harve reached out and drew Ginny close beside him. With her snug on the crook of his arm, he wondered how he could do it. The next day would be Saturday and then would come Saturday evening and how would he make it through that? He allowed himself to think that he might not. He could take Ginny with him, out there to the stretch of fallen trees. He could.

And somehow knowing that option existed made it okay for him to try, to simply give things a chance, see how they went. And then maybe, if it got any worse. Maybe then.

Ginny's system didn't take well to cow's milk. That fact dawned on him when in the late afternoon, after five days of crabbing and hardly sleeping and not having produced one dirty diaper, the child practically exploded. Harve was sprinkling feed for the chickens when he felt it, the rumble, a small shaking like distant thunder. He opened his coat. She lay there, in her sling, grinning, baring her toothless gums like a little old man who's just told a dirty joke. The stink was worse than the hog house, so sharp and sour it made him gag. Harve turned his head. Then he felt the warmth just below his chest, the creeping soak of the seepage through two towels, his flannel shirt and long underwear.

This was not to be believed. This was disgusting. He looked down at his daughter and she looked up at him, her eyes bright, brimming with what Harve read as joy. And he laughed. "Way to go baldy," he said. And the words sounded good. They sounded like something the boys might say, like one of the things that might make Lorraine laugh or draw his daughters running into his arms. He liked the sound. That was the first he had spoken since Mamie walked out the door three days before.

Harve took Ginny with him into the warm water of the wash tub. He had their clothes soaking in a bucket spiked with shards of lye. The diaper sat outside the door, out in the cold. He wasn't going to mess with trying to salvage it. He would deposit it straight down the outhouse hole. But first, they had to deal with the mess at hand. Ginny had managed to get them both beyond even Harve's liberal definition of clean.

It scared him, how slick Ginny became when he had her soaped and wet. It reminded him of when he was butchering and his hands got so coated with shiny tallow that the big knife slipped. More than once he'd dropped it. More than once he'd cut himself and his blood had soaked into the meat, indistinguishable from the blood of the animal.

Harve held Ginny pressed gently against his bent legs. He scrubbed up as quickly as he could but not fast enough for Ginny. Her crying didn't bother him like it had when she did it for Lorraine, when he hadn't understood that she could be

fine and still cry. He smiled to himself when he realized how he'd worried about this night and how he would spend it, how he would get through. Ginny took care of that problem. He had laundry to scrub and hang to dry, supper to get, church clothes to lay out. The chores would keep him going, keep him moving forward, taking care.

Even after almost a week of handling the baby, Harve's uneasiness was not confined to bath time, but simply exacerbated by it. He held her always with care and precision, as though at any time she could slip away and land head first on the toe of his boot. He imagined it, imagined how much easier his decision would be then. How it would simplify everything if she were on the floor bleeding, her small head busted open. It scared him, how easy it would all be then.

That night Harve didn't bother putting Ginny in her drawer but simply put her down in the bed directly. Lying there, on Lorraine's side, her small body made the bed look bigger. They both slept a thick heavy sleep solid as the night.

Chapter 7

Harve started down his driveway two hours before mass. He doubted the walk would take that long but he did not know--it had been years since he'd walked into town and he did not want to be late. Ginny lie in her sling under his coat. Harve wanted to take his time, make his way across the snow and ice with care. The sky hung low and gray. Cattle huddled in a far corner of the pasture. Both he and Ginny were wearing their best clothes. As he crossed the main road and headed west into town he was looking forward to the company of other folks, gathering in the basement after the service, drinking coffee--good coffee--that someone else had made. He was thinking as still as she was, Ginny must be asleep.

Harve heard a car coming up behind him and climbed up on the snow berm at the side of the road. When he turned, he saw it was Eddie.

The young man pulled up and killed the engine. "Hey Harve. I was just headed over to see if you needed a lift."

Eddie shook his head, "I think we'll walk. I feel better walking these days." Harve wrapped his arms lightly about the bulge under his coat.

"Maybe come inside and warm up a minute?"

"We're headed to mass."

"I have a letter." Eddie said, "Man came by last night and asked me to give it to you. It's from the railroad."

Harve stood silent for a moment, looking at the gray sky. He took a deep breath and climbed down off the pile of snow. It was warmer inside the car, out of the wind. Harve unbuttoned his coat. Ginny was asleep. Eddie handed him an envelope. Harve slit it open with the blade of his pocket knife. He looked inside. It was a check. An expression of condolence.

Harve handed the envelope back to Eddie. "What good is money to me now?"

"She might have a use for it." Eddie said with a nod in Ginny's direction.

"Do me a favor?"

"Anything," Eddie said. "You know that."

"Find a bank--maybe a couple of them--that'll hang on to that kind of money for me." Harve fastened his coat and started back down the road. As Eddie drove slowly past, Harve lifted his gloved hand but did not look his way.

The money changed nothing and everything. His family was gone but he and Ginny would have anything they wanted, they would survive. That knowledge settled through Harve like a weight.

Harve saw the train while it was still a long way off--just a speck growing fat on the horizon. He kept walking toward the track. The rumble spread like light, taking over. Harve felt surrounded. His teeth rattled. The ground shook. The engine flew past. Harve stood in the rush of wind, watching the wheels, watching them churn and turn. He kept his arms folded over Ginny. It would be easy, easy as walking

and falling. They could be crushed before they felt a thing. Harve took a step and stopped. Two more and it would be over. That's what stopped him--the permanence of it, the no going back, the singularity of the action. The last car whooshed by. Quiet settled like relief. Harve climbed up on the track and watched, he stared until the train looked to be swallowed by the gray sky.

After mass, Eddie had them over for dinner. Harve discovered Eddie was a pretty good cook, at least when it came to cutting up and frying a chicken. Harve watched closely and learned. Eddie put him to work peeling potatoes. Harve thought peeling potatoes was a lot like whittling, the initial part anyhow. He enjoyed it. They passed the afternoon playing checkers and discussing markets and what to plant in which fields.

That evening after walking home and putting Ginny to sleep in the big bed once again, Harve went out to the decimated shelterbelt and gathered five of the best chunks of wood. He put newspapers down in front of his chair and started whittling. This was what he needed, he decided, a serious project to occupy the time between when Ginny fell asleep and he was ready to turn in himself. It comforted him, the clean simple motion of it. He started out, not knowing what he would make.

Chapter 11

By the time Ginny was a little over a year old, Harve had developed a whole system of unique ways of caring for her, methods he knew were not conventional but that worked for him. Like when it came to trimming her nails. He knew it was time when he noticed the angry red scratches on her cheeks. But he was too nervous, too unsteady to use anything like a scissors or nail clipper. Instead he chewed them. Nibbled each of her small nails down, but never too far.

Ginny was a curious toddler, quick and bright. On a cold Saturday night she sat splashing next to Harve in the wash tub. Her hand, her tiny little hand reached out and squeezed him. Harve's reaction was swift. He felt himself stiffen and automatically grabbed her hand and slapped it. Ginny looked up at him stunned. He lifted her and swung her outside the tub. She half slipped, half fell onto the cold hard floor. She lay and looked at him, her arms akimbo, her lower lip a quiver. She looked helpless and Harve was immediately sorry. There was nothing wrong with her curiosity, he assured himself. She intended nothing by it--sin required knowledge, the ability to recognize right and wrong.

Harve thought back and tried to remember how long Lorraine had bathed with the children. He remembered having to help with the twins, how they had been able to stand and splash. He recalled their ease with her body, her ease with her body--how she shared a closeness with their babies he envied. She shared a different sort of familiarity with him.

She was generous with her body and Harve had felt certain--long before the accident--that her generosity, her physical self and their relationships to her, was what bound them as a family. His relationship with Ginny lacked that smoothing buffer that Lorraine would have afforded it. Instead they butted straight against one another.

After that, Harve took to giving Ginny her bath early Saturday evening and waiting until she was asleep to take his own.

Harve and Ginny spent every Sunday afternoon at Eddie's. And it was a good thing too, or Father Callahan's might have been the only human voice Ginny ever heard speak full sentences. Harve forgot to talk during the week. It struck him as silly to pretend to converse with a barely cogent toddler. Harve often went whole days without speaking a word until bedtime. Then they knelt beside the bed for prayers and Harve spread the dolls on the quilt in front of them. Harve had whittled the dolls himself from chunks of wood he'd gathered from the decimated shelterbelt. He'd carved the likenesses--faces and the outlines of clothing--trying again and again until he felt satisfied he'd gotten them almost right. The dolls were pale and hollow, each fitting snug inside the next biggest , excepting, of course, the smallest. The smallest was solid and whole, did not divide at the middle and pull in half like the others. Harve named the dolls. He repeated their names over and over each night for Ginny, before and after prayers.

Lorraine was the biggest, the mama. Then James and Jake and Frances and Doris and finally, the wee one, weighty and unbroken--a solid bit of wood--the little one the others all protected, the receptacle of all their hopes.

1944

Chapter 14

"I want braids," Ginny said. Her wet hair hung against her back soaking her night gown. Her hair was long, down to the middle of her back. She had never had it cut, not once in nine years. It was the deep brown of wet wood. She knelt on the living room rug with her back to Harve. He gently worked out the snarls. He started at the bottom, inching the comb slowly, smoothly toward the crown of her head. "Do you know how to do braids?"

Harve said, "Never know until you try."

"Irene could show you." It was Saturday night, bath night. Irene, Eddie's wife, had always been good about answering Harve's questions about cooking and washing. Ginny looked back over her shoulder at him. "She does Mara's hair in pigtails. He set his palm against her head and turned it back so she faced the other way.

"Irene has enough to do." Harve asked her if she'd suddenly become too good for her usual pony tail. Ginny was growing up. He'd thought she was a hand full when she was a baby but he had had no idea. Ginny told him a girl at school had told her braiding was good for long hair. The braid kept it healthy by trapping and conserving the hair's natural oils. Harve did not deem it necessary to mention that he had never braided anything, not so much as rope or wire or a horse's tail. Ginny so rarely asked him for anything anymore, he had to at least try.

These Saturday evening sessions were the only time Harve felt really close to Ginny, like he had when she was little, when it was just him and her, and once in a while, Eddie, against the world. He referred to their Saturday night ritual as "Beauty Shop."

"What does circumcision mean?" Ginny asked, out of the clear blue sky.

Harve concentrated on a snarl. Ginny was patient. She was used to him thinking a while before he said anything. Harve cleared his throat. "Where'd you learn that word?"

"Is it a bad word?" Ginny sounded hopeful.

"Not necessarily." Harve tried to be fair, factual-- answer her questions without leaving room for ambiguities. "Who said it to you?"

"I just like the sound of it, circumcision. It's a fun word, but hard to spell. I couldn't find it in the dictionary."

"Well don't go making jump rope rhymes with it."

"Is it dirty?"

"It refers to the condition of a man's private parts." Ginny was silent, embarrassed. He could tell even though her back was to him. She dropped her head. Harve realized this was the time, the opportunity he'd been waiting for-- dreading. "Ginny, have you noticed the difference between the cows and the bull?"

She answered that the bull had horns, there was only one of him, he was mean, he was huge, and she was afraid of him. Not so with the cows.

"I meant more along the lines of the cows having calves." Harve had her hair combed. Now he just had to figure out how to braid it.

He had seen it done, seen it done plenty. Lorraine had braided her hair every night before bed. He watched her, all through the darkness, watched her with his own head on the pillow. She wound the lengths of hair, her long smooth hair, soft and brown. Lorraine's hair was so long she tossed it forward over one shoulder and swiftly and surely wove the braid, always drawing into the middle. He remembered that, bring the outsides to the middle.

"The cows are female. The bulls are male. They're different." Harve divided Ginny's hair into three sections.

"Is this about," Ginny hesitated, "sinning?"

Harve tried to be gentle but the damp hair was slick and he had to pull it taut. "I don't want you to be surprised is all, if one day you bleed." The hair wanted to slip away, he wound faster, tighter. Without meaning to, he yanked Ginny's head back.

"It hurts."

Harve let go. He dropped the hair from his hands, from between his fingers. But it hung clumped, knotted. He picked up the comb and started from the bottom like usual.

"I don't want to bleed."

As Harve tugged at the hair below, he drew the strands tighter into the tangle, wound the whole mess bigger, more severely, inextricable. "You don't get to choose." He worked the comb around the edges of the clump of hair. It did no

good. He couldn't loosen the knot. "I'm sorry," he said and stood and helped her to her feet. He led her into the kitchen where he lifted a butcher knife from the drawer. "We should do this outside," he said. "Less mess that way." Ginny looked frightened. She was shivering. Harve helped her into her coat and boots. "Don't worry," he said. "It won't take long."

It was a cold clear night. The stars were scattered bright across the sky. A low wind shuffled the loose snow across the frozen drifts. The dog came up and stood beside them. Harve listened to the quiet. He loved stepping outside at night just to feel the silence, pet the dog, watch the stars. He wished tonight's excursion was under better circumstances.

He couldn't put off the inevitable any longer. He raised the knife and drew Ginny's hair taut, up and back from her head. He hated to do it, but the knot was too severe. This would teach him to attempt things he knew nothing about. Ginny tilted her head all the way back, exposing her neck and stared up at him with huge, anxious eyes. He pulled her hair taut and brought the blade down swiftly. Ginny screamed. Her hair poked unevenly from her head. Harve held her hair up high by the ends. The knot dangled like a heavy jewel. Ginny ran inside. Moments later Harve saw the light go on upstairs in her room. Harve stood and wondered at the heavens. Their discussion had gone better than he'd hoped. He threw the hair and the dog fetched.

Chapter 16

Ginny believed she was magic. She kept a secret list of her miracles folded and wrapped around her favorite rag doll. The doll had a little gingham dress with a small apron. Ginny tied the apron strings taut in a double bow to hold the paper in place. But it wasn't like she needed the list to remind her.

She could not tell if she remembered the train wreck or if she just imagined she did, but she knew she saw it in her mind's eye--could run it like a film whenever she chose. The day was bright and cold. The car chugged and rattled. Cold air rushed through the car, buckling the canvas curtains. Her brother held her. The car stopped. She remembered her mother's voice--smooth and sweet. They were in the car. The curtains were moving again. It was cold. She remembered being torn from her brother's arms, ripped away. She smelled her mother. And then she was flying, floating on the bright air her blanket tails lifting. She was flying, the blue sky was above her, the white of the snow below. She felt suspended by the light, she felt like she flew for a long time, like she could have gone up or down. Then the ground reached up and grabbed her, pulled her to its surface. She skidded on the snow. Came to a stop. But the world shook. The world rattled. There was an explosion of sound and light. A terrible scraping, grating sound, a sound so full and low and hard it hurt even her eyes. And the light. The light was beautiful.

It burst full and blinding. It pushed her along the snow. It rose lifting into the brightness of the sky.

That was her first miracle--she claimed it even though she knew it wasn't really her doing.

The next one was when she was two and a half. She'd seen her father take the point of his knife and poke it into the enormous belly of a cow. Ginny could tell her father was worried. She wished for the cow to be better. By the next day it was fine. She couldn't even see the tear in its hide where her father had driven the knife point. She knew then, she had done well.

Ginny loved cats. Before she decided to talk she could think things and the cats seemed to understand. Even the wild ones followed her around the farm. An easy forty had the run of the place. They trailed her everywhere she went. She fixed them pans of oatmeal and when her dad was off taking care of something else, she mixed in cream. The cats were her friends, her only friends.

When she was five, she stepped into the barn to find her father with a tom. He had the cat's front legs and head stuck down a tall boot. He had his knife out and the back legs splayed. He was about to make a cut. His back was to her. Ginny said, "Oh hell." The first words she ever uttered. Her father dropped the knife and ran to her. He lifted her up, gave her a little toss. Ginny smiled and watched the cat, all parts still intact, work himself free and run.

When Ginny first started at school one of the boys kept calling her father a crazy old coot. The boy said her father

was a walking fool, out of his head. The boy shut up when Ginny pointed her index finger at him, zeroed her eyes, and clucked her tongue. A dark stain spread across the front of the boy's pants. He never said a word about Ginny's father ever again.

Ginny's dad told her there was a reason for everything. He said it was a miracle she survived the crash. He said he did not know what he would have done without her. He credited her with saving his life. He told her she was special, she had five angels looking out for her--she was lucky, the receptacle of all their hopes. And that was pretty much the extent of everything he ever told her, the extent of any conversation they ever had. Her father was not big on conversation or speaking in general. And perhaps, Ginny reasoned, that was part of what gave her her powers. She had to be astute and focused to read her father--skills that would serve her well out in the world.

Chapter 18

Without a thought to her room full of hats and dresses and hunks of jewelry, Ginny eloped. That afternoon, feeding the chickens, she had felt the heat of the sun on her arms and breathed that rich salty smell of her own sweat. She had run her tongue across her wrist but the scent was stronger than the taste. She was too anxious for supper. Harve had pointed at her baked potato and thick slice of ham. "You going to eat that?" She shook her head and pushed the plate toward him. Since graduation the week before Ginny had spent all day every day washing and cooking and turning over the garden. Harve was busy with field work and gone all day. She felt like a surrogate wife--all of the chores but none of the intimacy. Harve read the paper while she did the dishes. When she finished she went and closed the door without a word. She was afraid that if she said anything he would know--be able to tell just from the high, shaky sound her voice.

She wrote Harve a note, left it in the bottom of the milking pail. The flat white of the paper was surrounded by the shiny circle of galvanized steel. "Thanks for everything. I'm getting married. He's not Catholic. Please don't be too mad. Your Daughter, Ginny."

She picked up her grocery sack stuffed with a grey skirt and jacket--the wedding suit she'd ordered out of the catalog, she couldn't get white or her dad might have figured it out--three pair of underwear, pajamas, a hairbrush, and curlers. The night felt cold. Those cool spring nights

landing on the tail of the first warm days always felt colder to Ginny than the frozen nights in deepest winter. It was the contrast she supposed. Her steps quickened and she was scurrying, then half running, then jogging, then sprinting down the dirt drive hugging the paper bag to her chest with both arms. She saw the car, heard the motor running. As he saw her he flipped on the lights. She stopped, caught in the beams tunneling out of the headlamps. The wash of light hurt her eyes. She closed them lightly and dropped the bag. She knew he was watching, felt his gaze on her goose-bumped skin. She gathered the fabric of her skirt in her fingertips raising the hem high above her knees. She swayed. Then shuffled her feet and broke into a jig.

When she climbed inside the car he stretched his arm around her and pulled her to him. His jacket was stiff and rough against her skin. "You're cold," he said and set his lips against hers. She made herself kiss him back. Maybe if it had been warmer. Maybe if the night had been a few degrees more hospitable, she would not have gotten in the car or at least not have gone to the hotel or at least not have gotten in bed beside him or at the very least not have let him touch her. And then she could have gotten up in the morning and changed her mind--just as she did, just as happened--and gone home. And her dad would have had some questions but eventually, everything would have been fine.

But Ginny was cold. She was chilly and she wanted warmth and because she was magic, she got what she wanted.

As he pulled onto the road, she turned, craning her neck. He drove and the yard light grew fainter. Ginny stretched her eyes, looked hard, but still, eventually, it faded completely. Ginny felt elated and scared. She thought, "He'll never understand me." It was one of those thoughts so huge, it came out her mouth. This happened frequently to Ginny, a powerful thought lifting off her tongue. She blamed all the time she spent alone.

He moved his hand from the steering wheel to the inside of her knee, "Give it time," he said, "Your dad will come around." The darkness felt familiar, safe. He could not see her face as Ginny leaned over and kissed his cheek. She didn't have the heart to tell him it wasn't her father she had been referring to.

Chapter 19

Ginny liked the man she married well enough. He was good for her. Everyone said so. Everyone except Harve and Eddie. Ginny believed she would grow to love her husband the way she had green beans--an affinity born of consistent availability and no other options. He could give her what she wanted. Ginny wanted to make babies, lots of them, a baker's dozen, and right away.

So when he climbed on top of her, she opened her legs to him. She did not want to wait, not even until the next day when the court house would open and they would be married and sex would not be a sin. She concentrated on the "Star Bright Inn" sign, lit up like Christmas and right outside the window. When he entered her she screamed at the sharpness of the pain. He pulled away and whispered in her ear. But she didn't hear what he said. She wasn't listening. She was far inside her own head telling herself this was how it was done, this was how the magic happened, this was how she'd get a baby. This was the first step toward her being part of a family. She pulled him on top of her and guided him inside. Her center burned. She sucked breath through her teeth. She tensed and tried to move. But the weight of him had her pinned. The headboard slapped the wall to his rhythm. She felt hot and nauseous with pain. She thought about what she would name her babies. She had six of them decided by the time he finally rolled off. He lay on his side and touched

her hair. "Don't worry," he said, "we'll manage it next time."

Ginny wasn't sure what she was supposed to be worried about besides feeling like she'd been ripped open with a dull knife. She shook her head at him. "I didn't," he said, and dropped his eyes, "you're bleeding pretty bad." Ginny got out of bed. Drops hit and swelled on the thin rug. She locked the door behind her and ran a bath. She soaked in the pink water until the pain had eased. He was fast asleep when she returned. In the morning she stripped the bed and balled the sheets and rug and snuck them in an alley garbage can. He never asked her what she was doing or why. He seemed to understand her embarrassment, condone it.

Ginny was married with a stolen motel wash cloth pressed between her legs. She stood stern in her grey suit and vowed to a host of promises while wishing she would wake in her childhood bed to find the night before had never happened. Before she keyed back in to what the justice was saying, her new husband kissed her, hard. And it was done.

Part 2
1952
Chapter 21

After Ginny left, Harve sold their farm and moved in with Eddie. Ginny knew her father disowned her not because she ran away, not because she eloped but because she left the church and married a Lutheran. Ginny understood excommunication and being disinherited but she resented the hell out of his moving in with Eddie.

Eddie's farm always teetered on the brink of insolvency. Dry years combined with falling prices and a growing family had Eddie and Irene strapped--barely keeping their heads above the rising sea of debt. Harve offered to help but Eddie's pride would not allow it. Once in a while Harve would slip one of Eddie's kids a bill and try to smile. But the smile never reached his eyes. It just hung there, forced, a slight narrowing of his mouth too weak to slake the sadness from his face.

The children were respectful--taking turns walking into mass with him. But Harve mainly kept to himself. After breakfast, he took his hat and cane and set out to wander. He would go into town to the church or walk along the railroad tracks until it was time to turn back and head in for supper. It was on those walks about his nephew's farm that Harve noticed how, when the train passed, it troubled the water of the stock pond.

Eddie and his kids came in from haying one hot, dry day. The sort of hard sun that bleached bone glanced off the

windmill blades and metal roofs. With their throats parched and their skin scratched and itching, they bee-lined for the well and stopped short. In the weeds lay Harve's cane. They peered down the well, stared into the heavy, black tunnel of it. They called and their voices bounced back, loud and low-pitched like a gift refused.

Eddie's seven year old, Rose, was a skinny little thing. He called her to him, set her crouched in the bucket, and lowered her down. She held the rope in her fists and he sent her deep, inched her into the blackness. She started to sing *Silent Night*. Her high, tuneless *all is clear, all is bright* echoed, reverberated back and forth, climbing the walls till it flew free of the well. Eddie heard her splashing, slapping the water, feeling for a sign of Harve. Eddie and his children listened to the sharp, cool sounds rising from that black hole. Their tongues swelled fat in their dusty mouths. They pulled her up, lifted her out, and one by one they drank. They swallowed the water down, sending the bucket back again and again. Drinking until their insides felt swamped and floating, drinking until their stomachs bulged.

The heat inside the church was stifling. Sweat tickled down Ginny's side. A lone fan sat in the back attempting to move the air through the crush of bodies. *It's like the whole county's here*, Ginny thought. When she took Eddie's call she sensed the neighbors listening in on the party line. Not that she blamed them, she'd done the same thing when Harve had left her alone and she'd had the chance. The priest droned on

about her father's devotion. She wanted to yell that he was scared not devout. He viewed that train wreck as God's punishment for his missing church. And here again Ginny couldn't claim she was any different. Three years into her marriage, still no babies. She knows she's barren. Month after month blood stains the crotch of her underwear. She enlisted her husband in an experiment. At the end of one of her periods they began having sex once a day. For thirty days solid, they never missed once. And again she cramped, felt nauseous and a day later, at work in the flower shop, she felt the hot burst of blood. She had not cried then. No, she had gone to the bathroom and taken care of the situation. She sat there a long time. Ginny decided her infertility was God's punishment for abandoning Harve. If she didn't appreciate what family she had, why should God grace her life with babies? She decided then and there she would go see Harve. She would take the first step. Maybe if she tried to rectify and make amends, God would show mercy. She had left the bathroom and started watering the plants with extra warm water that released the smell of dirt--the deep, earthy smell that smell that took her mind home. She was standing over a potted ivy, inhaling when the phone jingled. It was Eddie. He didn't know what to tell her except that her father was missing. All they had was his cane.

Ginny fanned herself with the prayer card. She was seized by a giggle fit. Not that her father's death--if that was what had happened--was funny. Ginny blamed the little pill, white and round as a full moon, that her neighbor had

brought by. "They work wonders, dear. One of these will get you through. It'll seem like any other day. Maybe better." And Ginny felt certain that pill was why, in the midst of her father's funeral service, a joke looped through her head.

An Irish fellow's sitting in a pub. One of his buddies comes in and sits down next to him. "I'm so sorry," he said, "I heard you buried your wife yesterday."

The man turns to him, "Had to. Dead, you know."

Ginny covered her mouth with her gloved hand and shook with laughter. She kept thinking, but there is *no body*, no burial required. *Had to. Dead, you know.* It cracked her up. And her own laughter became evidence for her that he wasn't even dead. If he were dead, she would feel something. If he were dead, she wouldn't be laughing.

The congregation stood. One of Eddie's children, the skinny little girl with two braids, tapped her shoulder and whispered so sharp the words hurt her ear, "Mom says someday you're going to be crying just as hard as you're laughing." And Ginny believed what the child had said was true.

Outside the church, Eddie approached her. He gave her a terse awkward hug and handed her Harve's cane. "If you ever need anything . . ." he started and then started over, "You look good Ginny. Life in the big town suits you. I can tell."

Ginny laughed. She tossed the cane back to him. "He may be back for it." Eddie gave her a nod. Ginny said, "And I don't believe you for one minute." She started walking to her car. Stopped. Turned toward him and said softly, so softly he could barely make it out, "All my good magic is gone."

The chickens and the real little kids playing in the yard probably saw what happened to Harve. But they weren't talking. The whole situation looked suspicious--the farm on the verge of going belly-up, Eddie the sole beneficiary of a hefty life insurance policy. No one had known better than Harve how a windfall could change your life--a windfall and a train wreck. Not that the cash would do any more for Eddie than postpone the inevitable. It was like that guy from Pukwana who won the Lotto. When they asked him what he planned to do with the money, he said, "Keep farming till it's gone."

Everyone, all the relatives, all the neighbors, had a theory. Having grown shaky with age, Harve could have been hoisting the bucket, leaning forward for leverage, and fallen. He may have tumbled in on purpose--saving the farm, buying Eddie and his family time. For all anyone knew Harve set down his cane and walked off, just kept walking till he couldn't anymore. Eventually, the coyotes would have taken care of him.

Most folks didn't believe for one minute Harve was pushed. That thought crossed Ginny's mind. But she never came right out with an accusation. And she never forgave her father for going to live with Eddie--allowing himself the only thing she ever wanted for--she couldn't. Not anymore than he could forgive her.

Eddie wondered if Harve heard the children's voices, heard them laughing in the yard and mistook the sound as coming from the well.

No one ever knew for sure. But Eddie's entire family knew one thing. Even after they filled in that well--just to be on the safe side--and dug another, their water tasted awful. It tasted like iron. It tasted like rust. It tasted heavy and sour, like a lifetime of sadness, like a heart gone hard.

1966
Chapter 23

Eddie turned onto his gravel drive. He drove slow over the half mile of mostly dirt. After harvest he'd have to have the driveway re-rocked. Eddie eyed the corn, gauging its height as compared to years previous. He had the radio on. Tammy Wynette was singing and he was humming. The truck windows were down. The sun was hot and the air smelled of dry summer dust.

Eddie made the most of his Sundays--church and then a lazy afternoon of visiting. He pared the chores down to milking and feeding. Sundays bridged one week to next--allowed him to situate any catastrophe or triumph squarely in the past, and keep moving forward. Eddie was enjoying this Sunday even more than most. His stomach felt full, the corn looked good, he'd left his sister-in-law's early in order to have some time to himself, maybe talk with his daughter. An afternoon of nothing but leisure stretched full in front of him.

Eddie rounded the barn and saw the boy's truck. The sight soured the food in his belly. He flipped off the radio. The vehicle was barn-red and not more than two years old--well beyond the boy's means. So this was why Rose had refused to go to her aunt's. The girl knew better. Eddie and Irene rarely allowed her to have the boy over even when they were home.

Rose was headed for trouble. Eddie could feel it. He felt it in the sinking sensation he experienced when he

thought of her. He felt it in the set of his jaw and the grit of his teeth and the way his back stiffened when she feigned nice because she wanted his permission to go out--to a dance or a movie or fishing--with the boy.

The boy, Dean, came from a shady family. His father was long on talk and short on follow-through. They tried whatever get-rich scheme made headlines--mink, pot-bellied pigs, roosters from China, sweet potatoes. They raised them all, for a time, till a storm hit, or the animals started dying or the ground froze--then the boy's father showed up in town begging drinks.

Eddie had found him one night sitting on a curb along Epiphany's main street, taking pulls from a bottle of mouthwash. Eddie drove him home but made the man ride in back, in the bed of the pick-up, so he didn't have to talk to him or smell him or look the drunk in the eye.

Eddie tried to tell Rose she could do better. He tried to tell her it wasn't worth it, getting mixed up with that family. He wanted her to know that the way they never stuck with anything or took care of what they had was a flaw, an issue of character. It was a problem that love or anything else wasn't likely to overcome. He had wanted Rose to know she came from a solid family. She was too good for that boy, plain and simple. Sure, he was pretty and fast, Eddie could understand his draw. But it wouldn't last. There was no way it could.

What Eddie had said was, "Rose, that boy's playing you for a fool."

Eddie thought Rose pretty. He saw none of his own largeness in anything but her spirit. Her black hair hung thick and sleek as a horse's coat. When she pulled it back, gentle wisps framed her face. Her dark eyes were bright and brimming with spunk. She got her small nose and full lips from her mother. She had long nails and thin fingers. But for all her loveliness, Rose was devious. She had plans and Eddie thought if she ever did make it to the big town she'd go far. Rose talked about going to live with her older sister Mara and her family in town come fall. She planned to save her money for a car. She talked about being established in Sioux Falls or Omaha within a year--spending her afternoons in museums and her evenings at cocktail parties sipping martinis from fancy glasses. Eddie had heard her spiel a thousand times if he'd heard it once.

The red pick-up parked in front of his house annoyed Eddie as fully and as steadily as a pebble caught in his boot. Legally, Rose was an adult--eighteen and graduated high school but she still lived under his roof and in Eddie's book that gave him a say in whose company she kept.

Eddie slammed his door, figuring he'd give them that much warning. A smooth wire fence fashioned in decorative arches and twisted loops surrounded the yard. Eddie noted the creak of the gate hinges. He liked it that way. From his bed he could hear how long it took between when his daughter's dates turned off their engines and when the girls passed through the creaky gate. Eddie didn't know for certain what Rose did out there on the seat of that shiny truck in the

middle of the night, but he did know she took her time doing it.

Cool air greeted him as he stepped into the kitchen. The heavy stillness told him no one was there even before he looked. The house ticked with emptiness. Eddie climbed the stairs and peeked inside the girls' room--nothing but a neatly made bed and the sun hammering in through a long blue curtain.

In the downstairs bedroom he changed from his dress clothes into his chambray shirt, worn thin at the elbows, and overalls. He thought for sure they'd be sitting in the yard by the time he was done--sitting there with some story about how Rose had taken the boy to the stock pond to fish but they'd gotten skunked. Nothing, not a thing, not even a cat. There were so many catfish in that bit of water you could catch them with a bucket. Eddie had three daughters older than Rose, he had heard it all.

He lifted his cap from the hook and settled it on his head. The sun was hot but the humidity wasn't bad. If Eddie had amorous intentions, he would take his honey to the shop. He checked inside, breathed deep the pure, heady smell of the dirt floor dripped with motor oil, tinged with the scent of gasoline. Dust danced in the stream of light pouring through the window over the work table.

Outside, he plucked a mulberry from a low branch. It was not yet fully ripe and tasted tart. He spat the seeds and sourness into the grass. The barn needed paint. He entered it

and called out. He thought he heard a rustling and climbed the ladder to the loft. But there was nothing--nothing but pale green alfalfa stacked to the rafters. Eddie used a pitch fork handle with a hay hook welled to its business end to pull down three of the upper most bales. They flew down and bounced on the wood planks and Eddie booted them down to the barn floor.

He decided he might as well give up on finding Rose and bring in the cattle. Eddie whistled for the dog on his way to the pasture. He stopped and waited. The sun glanced off the still blades of the windmill. The dog did not come running. Eddie wondered if it was with Rose and the boy, wherever they were. He opened the gates and bellowed, "Cuuuummmmmmboss" with his hands cupped about his mouth. The cattle raised their heads and started to lumber towards him. Eddie realized there was one more place to check and hooked the gate closed behind him.

He continued north through the pasture. The dry grass crunched under his boots. His stride was long and sure.

Harve had been gone almost eleven years when Eddie's shelterbelt started to die. He consulted his neighbors, the county extension agent, the ag department at the state college. He learned about elm disease, how it passed from tree to tree as their roots met and grafted. Intertwined in their search for sustenance, knotted together for strength so they might hold fast in the face of wind and weather, the roots formed a conduit for the blight.

Eddie imagined the trees imbibing a force that shriveled their leaves, turned them yellow, then brown, then to dust. The scourge traveled their trunks, ran down their branches. Over time the limbs went brittle and dropped at the hint of a strong wind. When he heard the groan, the crack, and crash, Eddie's thoughts always turned to Harve.

When Eddie came even with the line of trees he set his hand between barbs and pushed the taut strand of wire low enough to swing a leg across. He stepped lightly, peering into the shade of the shelterbelt. The sun sneaked through the leaves and danced puddles of light across the ground.

He heard movement, slow and soft, like a small critter-- a muskrat or day-blind coon creeping nimbly through the grass. He stood still and listened. Eddie heard voices, human voices--no words just shallow grunts like a hog rooting through slop. He looked hard, scanning the trees until he saw the white glint of sun off skin. They lay on a blanket and that boy, the boy who drove a truck he could not afford, who came from a family too lazy to even attend church, worked himself inside Eddie's daughter. Eddie saw her hair, her dark hair fanned out, spilling beyond the edge of the blanket, spread on the ground, and her ankles, her thin white ankles locked around the boy's middle, her toes stretching toward the tree tops as she took the boy inside her.

Eddie felt sick. He felt the heat of the day roil his gut with disgust and disappointment and shame. He pulled his eyes away. At his foot was a stone, deep red-purple, the size and color of a cow heart. He bounced the rock in his hand

three times and threw it. Eddie flung that rock harder than he'd ever thrown anything. It cracked against the trunk of a tree. A choir of birds rose like shot, scattering high into the sin-blue sky.

Eddie turned, crossed back over the fence, and called his cows home. The sun pulsed against his back. And Eddie wondered at and what he'd seen. Just what was it, he asked himself, that he had gone looking for?

When the cows were in and fed, Eddie sat in the cool quiet of the kitchen, waiting. He hoped Rose and the boy showed up before Irene and the younger kids got home. Eddie had things he needed to say and he preferred to do it without an audience. A woodpecker rattled beyond the open window. From the sound of the patter, the bird had taken to the pole that held the yard light. Any other day Eddie would have loaded his 12 gauge and scared it off but he had a rule, a personal rule--he would not handle a gun when he was angry. So he sat in his chair at the head of the kitchen table with a cup of thick coffee, hours old, in front of him. Eddie felt tired. He drank without tasting. And the woodpecker drove, steady as a jackhammer, into his light pole.

Rose and the boy entered the room laughing. The smell of sun and sweat lifted off their skin. Rose's tan face was flushed. She asked Eddie how dinner was. She moved toward him and asked after her aunt and uncle. She asked what he was doing home so soon. She looked bright and pretty and young.

Eddie kept his face still as stone. Rose slowed. Her expression turned serious. She asked if someone had died.

Eddie stood. His chair fell backwards and bounced against the linoleum. "I saw," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I saw the two of you."

Rose blushed. The deep pink crept up her neck and into her cheeks. The boy looked scared. Eddie walked up to Rose and squeezed her face in his hand, made her eyes meet his. "I raised you better," he said, and let go like he was shaking something filthy from his fingers.

Rose looked at him hard, "No. You raised me the way I am." She almost smiled. "Just the way I am."

Eddie's blood thumped in his head. He wanted to hit her. It would feel good, satisfying.

"What we did," Dean said and Eddie turned to face him, "was only natural."

Eddie was surprised he had the nerve. Hitting the boy would feel even better than smacking Rose. Didn't they know? Didn't they understand? God's grace, eternity and where they spent it, those were the stakes. Who did they think they were?

Eddie grabbed an egg off the counter and pitched it against the wall. The shell burst and flew, crackles of white across the floor. The brilliant yellow center crept slowly down the wall--the thick, sod-heavy wall. Eddie swallowed, his throat hurt, ached. "You are no daughter of mine." His

voice shook. "But know this: it isn't me you have to worry about."

The bird pounded its beak against the light pole. The sound and rhythm carried on the hot air. It drifted through the tops of the trees, bounced along the corrugated steel roofs of the buildings, caught on the edges of the windmill blades, and floated off toward town, all the way to the city, to the coast and over the ocean, into the stratosphere and on, to the reaches of time.

It rained the day of Rose's wedding. It rained steady, a cold, soaking rain--chilly enough to trip the dormant furnace. The church smelled of stale air and hot dust blasting up through the vents. Music sprang from the organ pipes and Rose met her father in the back of the church. She tucked her palm in the crook of his arm. Rose tried to beam, emit a radiance she did not feel.

Outside, the water fell in sheets of gray. The streets of Epiphany ran with mud. Water poured off eaves of the church, rushing and loud, swamping the ground. Rose had her period. Her insides felt like they were being wrung like a wet dishrag. A spot of blood had soaked through the taffeta of the borrowed dress. Her older sister, Mara, had sponged it carefully away while Rose tried to convince her to leave it. Rose knew what people were saying--the short engagement, the hurry-up wedding. Rose was smarter than that. She'd been careful--no way, she had told herself, was she going to

"have" to get married. Dean was good looking and a lot of fun but she had had no intention of getting stuck living on his family's sorry excuse for a farm. But here she was. The wedding seemed like the only way--the only possible atonement, her only manner of making amends to her father. Rose felt like this life, the one she would have with Dean on his family's run-down place, was the one she deserved, the one she had asked for--courted, like the risk of pregnancy.

Rose's father stared straight ahead. He did not look at her, not once. If he had Eddie would have seen Rose in Mara's wedding dress--the gown hanging on her like a sack. Rose was wire thin, always had been. Years later, when she became pregnant, Rose would wear tight clothes that wrapped her middle, bundled it tight and obvious. Years later, she would wear her belly like a badge. But today, Rose's wedding day, she did not have a belly, not even a hint of one. She was small and hungry and scared and her father, as she took his arm, looked like he'd just gulped sour milk. Rose lifted her lips to his ear. She could smell his aftershave. His hair was slicked back and mostly gray. Rose thought he looked distinguished in the way that world leaders looked distinguished at state funerals--fulfilling somber obligations in good clothes. "Smile," she whispered, her lips grazing his ear, "for me." Eddie's expression remained unchanged.

As they proceeded slowly down the aisle, her sleeve slipped, exposing her freckles and bra strap. The bodice was too long and the short sleeves revealed too much. It was a

summer dress not meant for a rain-soaked September day. Rose held her small bouquet of sumac and goldenrod in one hand and had the other on her father's arm. She could not right the sleeve without letting go, of something. She walked tall, letting the sleeve hang embarrassingly obvious, off her shoulder.

Dean's suit coat emphasized the breadth of his shoulders. His hair drawn up and away from his face sat stiff with the furrows left by his comb. He had an empty-headed grin plastered across his face. Rain slapped the windows, an irritating, steady pounding. Rose fixed the ring on Dean's finger and saw how much his hands were like her father's, large outsized hands with long fingers and thick knuckles.

I can do this, Rose thought. This is what will make it right.

All through the ceremony he held her hand, even during the part when they knelt in front of the priest and were supposed to close their hands in prayer, he held her hand on the little ledge above the kneeler. When the priest said the bit about a woman leaving her father, Dean gave her hand a squeeze. She didn't remember it hurting but she did remember the thrill of it like a drug--a blinding drug that allowed her to see only good, to hope.

Water beat against the stained glass. Rose and Dean clutched one another as they marched down the aisle. They stopped and stood in the foyer. Beyond the open doors the rain poured down. Bits of sleet gusted inside and stung Rose's skin. Her father was the first person out of the

church. He walked past Dean without so much as a hello. Rose stepped in front of him. She closed her arms around her father's middle. She pressed her head to his chest. She sunk against the warmth of his body. The pin that held his boutonniere poked her cheek and Rose winced, drawing back. Eddie kept his hands at his side. "You've made your bed," he said. Rose let go of him. Her father walked outside, into the driving ice of rain.

Rose shivered. Goose bumps lifted on her arms. Her sister wet a handkerchief with her tongue and rubbed the crusted dot of blood from Rose's cheek. Someone, Rose had no idea who, set his suit coat across her shoulders. Rose was hugged and kissed and congratulated by a church-full of people, by everyone she knew and a few people she didn't. She thanked them, each and every one. She invited them back to the house for cake. But she could not bring herself to smile. Her center hurt--cramped and throbbed. She felt as lost and lonely as she had the day her father had lowered her into the well. A bitter taste settled in her mouth. And the rain fell hard.